

Focus special

The making of the world's most wanted man: Part 2

Expelled from Saudi Arabia, bin Laden builds the global links that can bring him revenge

The making of bin Laden: Part 1

Jason Burke in Peshawar
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1990-96: Saudi disillusion and exile in Sudan

Prince Abdullah, the effective regent of Saudi Arabia, placed a soft, plump hand on his young compatriot's shoulder, smiled and spoke of friendship and loyalty. His words were smooth and conciliatory, but there was no doubting the harsh threat that lay beneath them.

'The family of Mohamed bin Laden have always been faithful subjects of our kingdom and have helped us greatly in our times of need,' he told the gathering. 'We are sure that nothing will be allowed to mar our good relations in the future.'

It was the autumn of 1990 and Abdullah was addressing Afghan veterans in a beautifully furnished lounge in his palace in Riyadh. Although the men nodded respectfully at the prince's words, the man to whom they were directed could barely conceal his anger. 'He was seething,' one of the Afghan commanders said. 'You could see it in his eyes.'

A few months earlier, on 2 August, Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait. Osama bin Laden, then living in his home town of Jedda, had immediately sent a message to the Saudi royal family offering to form an army of 30,000 Afghan veterans to defeat the Iraqi dictator. The men who had defeated the Russians could easily take on Saddam, he said, and he was clearly the man to lead them.

Bin Laden was in for a rude - and profoundly upsetting - shock. The last thing the House of al-Saud wanted was an army of zealous Islamists fighting its war. Bin Laden was received by senior royals, but his offer was firmly rejected.

Worse was to come. Instead of the Islamic army he envisaged protecting the cradle of Islam, the defence of Saudi Arabia - and thus of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina - was entrusted to the Americans. Bin Laden, seething with humiliation and rage, could do nothing but watch as 300,000 US troops arrived in his country and set about building bases, drinking Coke and alcohol and sunbathing. Bin Laden saw their presence as an infidel invasion. It even appeared to defy directly the dying words of the Prophet Muhammad: 'Let there be no two religions in Arabia.' The 33-year-old started lobbying religious scholars and Muslim activists throughout the Gulf. Playing on his celebrity status, he lectured and preached throughout Saudi Arabia, circulating thousands of audio tapes through mosques.

He started recruiting his army and sent an estimated 4,000 men to Afghanistan for

training. The regime grew uneasy, raided his home and put him under house arrest. Bin Laden's family, worried that his activities might jeopardise their close relations with the ruling clan, tried to bring him back into the fold but were forced eventually to effectively disown him. The pressure mounted.

In late 1990 an escape route appeared. Bin Laden received an offer of refuge from Hassan al-Turabi, the charismatic Islamist scholar in effect running Sudan. Turabi believed that the total defeat of Iraq and the discrediting of 'secular' Arab regimes would lead to an opportunity to set up a 'pure' Islamic government across the Muslim world. It was a seductive message. And the Saudi regime were thankful for an opportunity to get rid of him. They pushed bin Laden further in the hope that he would leave. Bin Laden cracked. He fled Saudi Arabia for Khartoum, the Sudanese capital. He was never to return to his homeland.

Bin Laden set up a home in a rich suburb of Khartoum with his four wives, his children and a core of close retainers. Then he flew in several hundred Arab veterans from Afghanistan to provide the basis of a broader organisation. Life in Sudan was odd. There were football matches and bathing trips to the Blue Nile, and long junior common room-type arguments over whether Shia and Sunni Muslims should unite to fight the common enemy, and points of Islamic doctrine. Bin Laden even opened a personal bank account in his own name. And most of the time of 'the sheikh' was spent making money, rather than spreading global jihad.

'The biggest myth concerns his wealth,' Ghazi Algosaibi, Saudi Arabia's veteran ambassador to London, said recently. 'I have read reports that he has \$300 to \$400 million stashed away. This is simply not true. When he left Saudi Arabia he did not take anything like that amount of money, and the Saudi authorities have taken great care to make sure he does not receive any money from the kingdom.'

In the group's offices in Khartoum, bin Laden, as befitted the boss, had the largest office. The group was run like any other organisation. There was a board of directors, a series of sub-committees and too many meetings. Employees nursed grievances over wages, healthcare, and alleged favouritism. Perks included travel (using the passports of Arab volunteers killed in Afghanistan), free tea and groceries.

The organisation ran a trading company called Laden International, a foreign exchange dealership, a civil engineering company and a firm running farms growing peanuts and corn. In payment for building a 700-mile road from the capital to Port Sudan, the government gave Bin Laden the monopoly on sesame seed export. Sudan is one of the world's three largest sesame producers, so it was extremely lucrative.

Other ventures were less successful. A plan to import bicycles from Azerbaijan was a total flop. Other hare-brained schemes were hatched, half-implemented and then went nowhere. But there was still enough cash to keep al-Qaeda's core business ticking along. The chief executive never lost sight of his main purpose. More than \$100,000 in cash went to Islamists in Jordan, funds were sent to Baku to set up an operation smuggling Islamic fighters into Chechnya, another \$100,000 went to an Eritrean Islamist group.

At one point bin Laden bought a plane for \$250,000 and hired a pilot. The plane soon crashed. He also set up several military training camps, and hundreds of Algerians, Palestinians, Egyptians and Saudis received instruction in bomb-making and terrorist tactics. Many of them had fought in Afghanistan and now, like bin Laden, were at a loose end. There was talk of assassinating President Mubarak of Egypt, though nobody was sure how to go about it, and there was some haphazard surveillance of possible targets for a bombing in East Africa, including the Nairobi embassy of the US.

weapons in Eastern Europe and a bid to smuggle hundreds of Kalashnikovs on camels across the desert to Egypt. A shipload of guns was sent to Yemen and operatives dispatched to help tribesmen fight US troops in Somalia.

The CIA claim that bin Laden was behind the attacks on their troops in Mogadishu in 1993. However, there is little evidence that al-Qaeda were heavily involved. 'During bin Laden's stay in Sudan anti-American incidents happened in many places but none were conducted by his group in the usual sense of an order passed down a chain of command,' one intelligence source said. 'They were done by people who had trained in Afghanistan and had enough anti-American drive. Bin Laden may have sanctioned them but that was all.'

It was a pattern that was to be often seen in the years to come. A car bomb in Riyadh in 1995 was blamed on him, with the Saudis producing video 'confessions' from four Afghans for the attack. The Khobar Towers bombing a year later was also blamed on bin Laden, though Iranian agents are now the prime suspects. In 1994, when the Saudis publicly withdrew his citizenship, bin Laden's response was to exploit the power of the media. It is believed he set up a London office called the Advice and Reform Committee (ARC). Its job was allegedly propaganda, issued vitriolic criticism against the Saudi regime. It was run by Khalid al-Fawwaz, now fighting extradition to the United States from the UK.

By January 1996, Khartoum was increasingly uneasy about its guest. Turabi contacted the Sudanese ambassador to Afghanistan, Atiya Badawi, who was based in Peshawar. Badawi, who had learnt the Pashtun language while fighting the Russians, had excellent contacts with his former comrades among the Mujahideen and, with Afghanistan split into hundreds of warring bandit fiefdoms, it was easy to persuade three of the most senior commanders in the Jalalabad area that a wealthy Saudi under their protection might give them an edge over their rivals. The three men - all of whom are now dead - flew to Sudan to ask bin Laden to return to the land of the jihad.

1996-98: Building an army of terror

It was a cool autumn evening in Kabul. Outside a high-walled house in the northern suburb of Wazir Akbar Khan were a dozen Japanese pickup trucks. The guards and drivers lounged against them. Though the area had escaped the worst of the fighting in the seven years since the Russians had withdrawn, shrapnel scars still pitted the walls and sandbags were stacked around every home. It was October 1996 and Osama bin Laden was in Kabul to meet the Taliban. It was his first visit to the city and his first encounter with the hardline Islamic militia army who had captured it a month earlier. In May a specially chartered cargo plane carrying the 39-year-old, three of his four wives, half a dozen children and a hundred of his Arab fighters had landed at Jalalabad airport. But the three Mujahideen commanders who had invited him back from Sudan had since been ousted and bin Laden, politic as ever, knew he needed to ingratiate himself with the new regime.

A month earlier he had sent a Libyan associate to Taliban leader Mullah Omar in Kandahar. Omar ordered Mullah Mohamed Rabbani, the deputy leader and mayor of Kabul, to meet bin Laden and see if he was as much of a friend as his subordinate had claimed. Their meeting was wary but friendly. Bin Laden spoke first. Ignoring their doctrinal differences, he praised the militia's aims and achievements and pledged his unconditional moral and financial support. Rabbani, pleased and flattered, offered the protection of the regime. 'Everybody left smiling,' a witness said.

The meeting signified more than an alliance between the world's most wanted terrorist and the world's most reviled regime. It was the start of the final - and most critical -

phase of bin Laden's development. Having secured the Taliban's protection, he was free to start building the most efficient terrorist organisation the world had ever seen.

The jihad against the Russians had given bin Laden much-needed confidence, contacts throughout the Islamic world and a taste for fame, respect and adulation. His authority and profile had been boosted further by his stance against Saudi Arabia and exile. And in Sudan he had been able to start the serious work of building al-Qaeda - a global umbrella group of Muslim extremists dedicated to overturning 'unIslamic' governments throughout the Middle East and further afield. But in terms of military capacity and strategic thinking bin Laden's group was still weak. In Afghanistan, he swiftly found a solution.

He had returned to a land that had known anarchy for six years. Thousands of Islamic militants were based in the old Mujahideen complexes in the east of the country. Many were sponsored by the Pakistani secret services who wanted zealots to fight India in Kashmir. Others were backed by a variety of Islamic groups from all over the world. In the camps the volunteers were trained in guerrilla warfare. Many had fought for the Taliban. Bin Laden's first problem was partially solved almost immediately. He had inherited an army.

In Afghanistan he found himself surrounded by men who could help him, especially dozens of exiled Egyptian extremists. They included Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri, a 37-year-old surgeon and a founder of the effective and sophisticated Egyptian al-Jihad group. Another was Mohamed Atef, the group's hard and competent military commander. Al-Zawahiri taught bin Laden about the political realities of global war. Atef lectured him on the military necessities. After several security scares, he moved his household to a former Mujahideen base at Tora Bora high in the mountains south of Jalalabad.

The Egyptians told him the best form of defence was attack. 'He did what they told him,' one security source said. After two months at Tora Bora, he wrote and circulated a 12-page article, full of Koranic and historical references, promising violent action against the Americans unless they withdrew from Saudi Arabia. In a significant broadening of his view - showing the influence of the Egyptians - he also spoke for the first time of Palestine and Lebanon as well as 'the fierce Judaeo-Christian campaign against the Muslim world' and 'the duty of all Muslims' to resist it. Bin Laden bought four of the Stinger missiles that had been supplied to the Mujahideen by the CIA and had them smuggled to Saudi Islamic groups.

When it discovered the plot, Riyadh was incensed. The Saudi government, along with Pakistan, had supported the Taliban as a means of countering Iranian and Russian influence in Afghanistan. Now the Taliban were sheltering one of their most determined enemies and ignoring demands to hand him over. More extreme measures were needed.

In early 1997 the Taliban discovered what they said was a Saudi plot to assassinate bin Laden. The Islamic militia, who by then controlled about two-thirds of Afghanistan, invited bin Laden to move to Kandahar for his own security. Bin Laden agreed and moved into an old Soviet air force base close to Kandahar airport. He cemented his relationship with the Taliban's upper command by funding huge military purchases, building mosques and buying cars for the leadership. He even helped construct a new residence for Mullah Omar and his family on the outskirts of the city and started work on a huge compound to be used for prayers at the start of Ramadan.

Bin Laden set up a system to cream off the élite from the existing training camps to al-Qaeda. The camp administrators told the volunteers that the best of them would earn an audience with 'the Emir'. When bin Laden met them, his aides would pick the most promising and send them to more specialised camps where, instead of basic infantry

techniques, they had psychological and physical tests, combat trials and finally instruction in the skills of the modern terrorist. Within a year, bin Laden had created the terrorist version of special forces.

Under al-Zawahiri's tutelage, bin Laden had also realised he needed to internationalise his cause. Towards the end of 1997 he started to work to unify Islamic movements under the al-Qaeda umbrella, using his money, charm and reputation to draw in leaders from around the world. He bolstered his support locally, giving money to village clerics to build mosques and, according to one Taliban source, organising the import of 3,000 secondhand Toyota Corolla estates from Dubai. They were given to the families of Taliban casualties so they could earn a living.

Finally, in February 1998, he felt strong enough to issue a fatwa in the name of the 'World Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders'. It was signed by bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and the heads of major Islamic movements in Pakistan and Bangladesh and endorsed by dozens of other groups throughout the region. It was, according to one Western scholar of Islam, 'a magnificent piece of eloquent, even poetic, Arabic prose'.

There was nothing poetic about its message. The fatwa said that killing Americans and their allies, even civilians, was a Muslim duty. Shortly afterwards bin Laden told an interviewer that there would be 'radical action' soon.

At about 11am on 7 August, 1998, Mohamed Rashid Daoud al-Owhali, a slim-shouldered, bearded 22-year-old Saudi, was standing in front of a toilet bowl in the men's lavatories on the ground floor of a hospital in a suburb of Nairobi. He was holding a set of keys and three bullets. His clothes - jeans, a white patterned shirt, socks and black shoes - were stained with blood. The keys fitted the lock on the rear doors of a light brown Toyota pickup truck which 34 minutes earlier had ceased to exist when the huge bomb it had been carrying had exploded. The blast had demolished the US embassy, an office block and a secretarial college, killing 213 people and wounding 4,600. Almost simultaneously a second bomb, at the US embassy in Tanzania, exploded, killing 11.

The driver of al-Owhali's truck, another young Saudi called Azzam, had effectively been vapourised. The two had sung songs in Arabic of martyrdom as they had driven to the embassy. Though at the time they thought they were to die together, in the end they didn't. Azzam was killed when, still sitting in the driver seat, he pressed a detonator button taped to the dashboard. But al-Owhali ran, and later told the FBI he had been handpicked by bin Laden while training in Afghanistan early in 1997, sent to fight for the Taliban that summer, then sent for more specialised training in terrorism by al-Qaeda instructors in March of 1998 and finally, in April, given his mission. Azzam had followed a similar path.

Thirteen days after the bombs in Africa, 75 American cruise missiles slammed into six training camps in the eastern Afghan hills. Other missiles demolished a medical factory in Sudan. The Muslim world exploded in anger and outrage. Bin Laden was launched onto the global stage.

1998-2001: Hidden in the deserts of Afghanistan

Three months after the missile strikes two luxury jets landed at Kandahar air base. One brought Prince Turki al Faisal, bin Laden's student friend and the head of Saudi Arabia's security services. The second was empty. It was there to take bin Laden back to Riyadh.

Prince Turki, who had been crucial in getting millions of dollars of official aid for the Taliban, went straight to Mullah Omar's residence where a magnificent lunch had been laid out. The prince began to lecture the Taliban leader about his ingratitude to his former benefactors. In the middle of his tirade Omar took a water jug from an attendant

and emptied it over his head.

'I nearly lost my temper,' he told the astonished prince. 'Now I am calm. I will ask you a question and then you can leave. How long has the royalty of Saudi Arabia been the hired help of the Americans?' Lunch went uneaten and the second plane returned to Riyadh empty. Shortly afterwards bin Laden pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar and recognised him formally as amir ul momineen - leader of the faithful. His fate and that of the Taliban were now inextricably linked.

He issued a statement denying all involvement in the Nairobi attacks - though he said that he welcomed them. No one believed him. The Taliban then said bin Laden had 'disappeared'. No one believed them either. In fact he was spending most of his time at an old Soviet agricultural collective, Farm Hadda, five miles south of Jalalabad.

The Saudi's life there was described to The Observer by a defecting al-Qaeda associate in June 1999. Bin Laden's daily routine reflected the rigour of his surroundings. After dawn prayers, he studied the Koran for several hours. Breakfast was dates, yoghurt, flat Afghan bread and black tea. Lunch and dinner was equally plain. Bin Laden's life was dominated by security concerns. Instead of using satellite phones - he believed the Americans used their signals to track him - bin Laden dictated messages to an aide who telephoned them from a separate location. He is currently guarded by a select group of mainly Arab fighters led by Saifu al-Hasnain, a 35 year-old Egyptian.

As al-Qaeda's operations expanded security has become simpler. By the beginning of this year, according to Russian intelligence, the group had more than 50 individual bases in Afghanistan. There were units of Arab fighters on at least three front lines, others stationed in Kabul and still more in newly built bases, some with airstrips, in the desert south of Kandahar. Every location was - and is - another safe haven.

As al-Qaeda's infrastructure expanded inside Afghanistan so did their profile beyond its frontiers. Throughout 1999 and 2000, rattled Western intelligence services blamed bin Laden for hundreds of threats and scores of attacks all over the world. Though many were only tenuously linked to him, bin Laden was happy to take the credit. Clever publicity stunts helped too. When the Americans posted their reward for him, 100-rupee notes were stamped with a picture of bin Laden and distributed throughout Afghanistan. Thousands of cassettes of his speeches were distributed across the region too and, according to a letter signed by bin Laden, journalists were bribed.

To reporters who did meet him he denied everything and nothing at the same time. When asked if he had chemical weapons, he merely said that the duty of all Muslims was to try to obtain the means to defeat tyranny. Questioned about terrorist attacks, he denied responsibility, but welcomed the actions of his 'Muslim brothers'. Last year suicide bombers attacked a US warship in a harbour in Yemen. Seventeen servicemen died. Once again Bin Laden hinted at his involvement but nothing more. And he made more threats.

In June he released a video showing al-Qaeda operatives training and footage of Palestinians killed by Israeli soldiers. He was shown standing by a map of the world and promising spectacular events in the near future. Also in the summer, arms dealers in Peshawar told The Observer, bin Laden's representatives had started buying Stingers and other surface-to-air missiles.

He also made massive purchases of small arms and ammunition and gave them to the Taliban, possibly in a bid to build up his credit with them. At a camp in the desert southwest of Kandahar - close to where US Rangers landed nine days ago - al-Qaeda completed the construction of a new airstrip. Every night throughout the summer, flights from the Middle East brought extra recruits and supplies. A concerted fundraising

operation in the Gulf also replenished al-Qaeda's coffers. There is also evidence that in the days before 11 September a number of al-Qaeda members tried to flee Afghanistan. Several were arrested by Pakistani police.

No one knows where bin Laden was when the Twin Towers crumbled. Most sources believe that, though he has been 'sighted' at a number of locations in Afghanistan, he was, and remains, in the desert south of Kandahar or in the remote mountains of Oruzgan. We know he is with al-Zawahiri, almost certainly with Mohamed Atef, a number of other prominent extremists and probably his son. An elite group, drawn from the three or four thousand Arab fighters currently in Afghanistan, is guarding him, along with a detachment of Taliban. We know he met Mullah Omar close to Kandahar a few days after the strikes began and analysis of the rocky background in the video released on the day of the US attacks reveals the tape was most likely filmed there or in the eastern province of Paktia, close to the Pakistan border.

'These events have divided the world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of the infidel' he said. 'Every Muslim must rise to defend his religion.' He ticked his targets off one by one - the Israelis, the 'apostate, hereditary rulers' of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and other Middle Eastern states, 'those killers who toyed with the blood, honour and sanctities of Muslims'. And he listed the victims - the Palestinians, the Iraqi children dying because of UN sanctions, the whole Muslim nation.

Five thousand people were dead in America. The greatest power on the planet was angry and frightened and looking for him. Hundreds of its warplanes filled the skies above his adopted homeland.

At dusk tonight, somewhere in Afghanistan's blasted and baked mountains and deserts, a small group of men will face the setting sun and kneel. As is customary, the most senior and respected among them will take a step forward and lead the group in prayer. Osama bin Laden will give thanks to God.

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